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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000213

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/CM

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON SOCI CH

SUBJECT: TIBET: TIGHT SECURITY IN LHASA IN OCTOBER 1 LEAD UP

REF: A) CHENGDU 170; B) 2008 CHENGDU 183; C) 2008 BEIJING 4279

CHENGDU 00000213 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: David E. Brown, Consul General.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: An elderly Tibetan couple visiting Chengdu described to PolEconOff the environment in and around Lhasa in the weeks leading up to Chinese National Day on October 1 as "very tense" with "soldiers everywhere." The environment they described tracks closely with observations by ConOff and PolEconOff during recent visits to Lhasa, in which the People's Armed Police (PAP) were observed to be maintaining a heavy presence in Lhasa's Tibetan quarter. A breakdown of the types and numbers of security forces observed in late August is provided in paragraph 8. End summary.

Lhasa residents: City "Very Tense" in Run-up to October 1

¶2. (C) An elderly Tibetan couple, who came to the Consulate in late September to apply for visas to visit relatives in the U.S. concurrent with the upcoming visit of the Dalai Lama, described the environment in Lhasa as "very tense" with "soldiers everywhere." Acknowledging that the high level of security force presence has been in place through the last year, the couple nonetheless stressed that there has been an additional increase over recent weeks in preparation for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC on October 1. In addition, September 27 remains a highly sensitive date they noted, marking the anniversary of the start, in 1987, of several years of unrest and crackdown. They reported that soldiers now regularly stop Tibetan residents of Lhasa and demand to see their ID cards. Individuals presenting non-Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) ID cards are immediately "sent home." (Note: There are a number of Tibetans from Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan in the TAR. End note.)

¶3. (C) "Visits" by soldiers to private homes are now a common occurrence, the couple told us. In addition, they described an increased presence of soldiers in villages in the Lhasa area. Their description of "soldiers" is most likely in reference to the People's Armed Police (PAP), who have established and maintained a heavy presence in Lhasa since the March 2008 unrest.

ConGenOffs Also Observed

Heavy Security Presence in Lhasa, Dominated by PAP

¶4. (C) The environment described by the Tibetan couple tracks with Consular Officers' observations of security arrangements in Lhasa during July (Ref A) and PolEconOff's August 2009 travel to Lhasa. In many ways they also appear to be similar to the arrangements noted by U.S. and other diplomats traveling in Lhasa a year ago (Refs B and C). PolEconOff observed in late August a particularly heavy security presence in and around the

Barkhor, the historic and religious heart of Lhasa, where numerous five-man PAP teams were observed patrolling regularly, supplemented by standing two-man PAP posts on the ground and at various rooftop locations. Occasional groups of young Han men in black and yellow track suits, described by one local as "Chinese soldiers" were also noted during both July and August trips.

¶ 15. (C) Local police from the Public Security Bureau were also on hand, but presented a much less intimidating presence than the PAP -- PolEconOff on several occasions observed ethnic Tibetan police casually sitting and chatting in Tibetan with local sellers around the Barkhor. Although PolEconOff observed both PAP and People's Liberation Army (PLA) vehicles and soldiers on several occasions while passing through the western, Han Chinese-dominated area of Lhasa, they did not appear to be in patrol mode while there, but either in transit or, in some cases, shopping during their non-duty hours. (Note: the PLA has a large headquarters office in this part of town. End note.)

¶ 16. (C) Inside the Jokhang, Tibetan Buddhism's most important temple, and located at the center of the Barkhor district, PolEconoff observed relatively little overt security force presence in late August, but noted at least one undercover security personnel, wearing one of the tell-tale black and yellow tracksuits described above. In addition, along with its view of the Potala Palace, the Jokhang's rooftop afforded views of one of the PAP's rooftop posts atop a neighboring building and a PAP patrol marching through Barkhor square. Inside the Potala Palace, CongenOffs in July and August observed PAP soldiers remaining in charge of security, with individual soldiers posted throughout the inner chambers -- an arrangement apparently in place for at least the last year (ref C). The PAP posture within the Potala was comparatively relaxed during the August visit, arguably explained by the fact that Han tourists were by far the dominant group within the palace walls. PolEconOff observed one ethnic Tibetan PAP officer (the only Tibetan PAP soldier encountered on this trip), apparently in casual conversation with one of the monks.

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A Kind of Normality:
Adjusting to Life under Unrelenting PAP Presence

¶ 17. (C) Despite the continuing heavy security presence, many of Lhasa's Tibetan residents appeared, in August, to be out and engaging in both their day-today activities and religious observation. Pilgrims were out in large numbers completing the Barkhor kora (circumambulating the Jokhang) and studiously ignoring the regular PAP patrols marching in the opposite direction. In late August, the annual religious ceremony at Drepung Monastery, which traditionally starts the Shotun Yoghurt Festival and in which monks carry a giant religious painting (thangka) up to be unfurled on the neighboring mountainside, was well attended by mostly local Tibetans. PolEconOff and somewhat reluctant FAO minders were carried along by a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd making its way clockwise around the thangka. The festival's official opening ceremony, held in front of the Potala Palace, was in contrast to an overtly Han Chinese affair replete with official speeches in Mandarin, advertising balloons highlighting corporate sponsorship, and a pop star flown in from Hong Kong. The high volume of tourist traffic noted in Ref A was also evident in August, with Han tourists from all over China dominating, but also including a number of foreigners. (Note: Most locals declined to attend the festival last year, reportedly supporting the Drepung Monastery monks' refusal to participate in the thangka ceremony. End note.)

¶ 18. (C) However, a couple of brief and tense conversations with locals pointed to the continued underlying tensions. A middle-aged Tibetan woman selling jewelry and souvenirs at a stand on one of the Barkhor side streets, immediately choked up when PolEconOff identified as an American, then expressed, with

a strong shake of her head while miming the action of shooting, her feelings regarding the PAP soldiers who marched by seconds later. When asked about preparations for October 1, a local international NGO employee sarcastically noted "There are lots of soldiers around. There's your preparation."

Breakdown of Security Personnel Observed Around Barkhor

19. (C) The following is a breakdown of the different types and numbers of security personnel observed in and around the Barkhor by PolEconOff in the August 18-21 timeframe, at various times of the day:

A) PAP patrols. These groups of five soldiers, each carrying an automatic weapon, were seen at all times in the Barkhor area, in fluctuating numbers, typically with no more than a few minutes interval between them. Each group appeared to be assigned to a set area, which they either circled or marched back and forth within. Areas where these patrols were observed included: the Barkhor circuit, which they patrolled counterclockwise against the flow of the pilgrims' route; around and through Barkhor square; the approximately 200 meters between the entrance into Barkhor from Beijing Donglu and the edge of the square; and streets throughout the Barkhor. (During one 15 minute walk around the Barkhor circuit at about 9:00pm, PolEconOff counted six patrol groups passing in the opposite direction.)

B) PAP standing posts. At least four soldiers were always seen standing guard at the gate into the Barkhor, occasionally augmented by the presence of one or two of the five-man PAP patrols. In addition, posts of two men each were seen at various locations around the Barkhor at any given time. The total number of the two-man posts fluctuated from one to four and locations changed regularly.

C) PAP rooftop posts. These posts appeared to all be groups of two, with the same uniforms and weapons as the PAP patrols and standing posts, as well as radios and binoculars. There was usually at least one post visible from the ground, and on one occasion three were seen within the space of a few minutes' walk in the Barkhor square area. Their numbers appeared to increase when fewer soldiers were patrolling on the ground.

D) Undercover soldiers. Groups of five-six young Han Chinese men wearing black and yellow tracksuits were observed on two occasions and described by a local as "Chinese soldiers". In addition, one pair was seen using radio and binoculars on the rooftop at the Barkhor area entrance from Beijing Donglu, and one track-suit wearing youth was also noted inside the Jokhang temple.

E) Local police/PSB. Several police posts were observed throughout the Barkhor area at all times. However, in contrast with the other security forces present, these appeared to be comprised of local Tibetans, and were heard conversing in Tibetan with local merchants on several occasions.

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